

# HEXHAM LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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## **Debate: What is History?**

Helen  
Rutherford

What is HLHS for? Should the Society look at issues and matters from antiquity only? Is family history irrelevant and not worthy of serious study? These questions came to mind after there were a number of complaints about the contents of the last newsletter and in particular about the amount of space given over to family history. Leaving aside the point that the newsletter can only print the information that the editor is sent, I thought it might be interesting to open a debate about this issue.

Genealogy is sometimes viewed by a section of historians as a lesser area of study; a self-centred pursuit with little merit or interest beyond the family concerned. However, as evidenced by the fact that the vast majority of queries and letters to the Society are rooted in family history, it is often the entrance point for many people with an interest in history.

Most families will merit only a stitch on the tapestry of history, some may merit a square but each stitch and square goes towards building up a full social history and picture of a community. Recent family investigations have led to fascinating information about the hat industry, the iron industry and market gardening in Hexham. This is all relevant to the historical profile of Hexham. Professional historians, and those with time and dedication can delve into the sites of Roman battles or medieval buildings but a wide section of amateur historians find a passion for history via their family.

The recent reports in the press about the low numbers of children studying history at GCSE level point to a perception amongst young people that history is a fusty and irrelevant course. Perhaps one way to demonstrate that it isn't is to engage young people on a personal level with their own history and then relate this to wider events?

As a Society with a wide and enthusiastic membership, we should be encouraging any and all interest and not seek to exclude areas of investigation that are viewed as too keenly focused. We should endeavour to be welcoming and inclusive to encourage any and all historical study and to ensure that all interests are nurtured as

a resource for the future. An interest in the family may be a starting point for something of greater general interest or it may simply be the spark that encourages someone to join the Society.

**British  
Association for  
Local History  
Award**

HLHS are delighted to report that Greg Finch's article on Dotland has been chosen as the "overall winner by a very large margin" of the British Association for Local History awards for the best article of the year. The certificate will be presented at the Association's Local History day in June and both Greg and Mark Benjamin, in his capacity as editor of the *Historian* will be attending the event. The article will be reprinted, possibly in a shortened version, in the 2009 edition of *The Local Historian*. This is a magnificent achievement, reflecting as it does both on Greg's scholarship and on the regard that The Hexham Historian has earned amongst the local history community. Tom Corfe would have been proud!

**Book  
Reviews**

Greg Finch

Max Adams, *The Firebringers: Art Science and the Struggle for Liberty in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain* (Quercus, £20)

By the time this review appears many members will have been able to attend Max Adam's talk to the Society just after Easter on the subject of John Martin and his circle. The book goes into much greater depth on the maverick Martin family, their Haydon Bridge and Tynedale background and the web of relationships between John and other creative individuals - artists, scientists, poets and engineers - whose influence helped to shape 19<sup>th</sup> century England. For the author the shared inspiration of the group was the cult of Prometheus, the mythological ancient Greek god who stole fire from Zeus to give it to man: a potent revolutionary symbol during a time of social and political ferment in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was John Martin, far more famous in his day than his contemporary, Constable, who dramatised the impact of fire and lightning on his huge Technicolor canvases.

Extensive research has been carried out for the book but the text carries its weight lightly. The narrative swoops down from broad picture to anecdote and character portrait then back up again in an elegant and engaging style. Many entertaining diversions can be found amongst the endnotes and references. It is striking how widely Martin's acquaintances personally ranged across art to science to engineering

and then back to art; enquiring minds born in a less specialised world before they could be taught that this breadth of interest was meant to be too difficult! The foundations of what today we'd call 'communications infrastructure' were laid down by members of this group; telegraph, modern postal system and computing. The Promethean metaphor works well.

The book is highly recommended to those with an interest in our industrial revolution, the highly combustible years during and after the Napoleonic Wars and how individual personalities left their mark in a rapidly changing world. For all that John Martin's ambition took him to London and that his circle of friends was largely metropolitan, the influence of the North East remains strong throughout. The Martin family's background informs much of the brothers' lives, and we are reminded of the local energy and self-confidence that drove industrial innovation in mines and rails in the region, and which was of national importance. It was a self-confidence, sometimes an obsession, that found expression in many ways – from George Stephenson's refusal to be cowed by the lofty imperium of a House of Commons Select Committee to Jonathan Martin's less constructive but nearly successful attempt to burn down York Minster and his subsequent meandering return to Tynedale. These are stories well told in a fascinating book of personal, social, economic and political history.

Stan Beckensall, ***Northumberland's Hidden History***, (Amberley ,£16.99)

Many years ago I was struck by an observation by a Devonian walker, broadcaster and writer that he used Dartmoor the way many people used universities. The landscape posed him questions, encouraged him to explore, and stimulated his mind. I believe that Stan's objective with his latest book is to foster that same spirit of enquiry and reflection in us in respect of the Northumberland landscape. Setting off along the 18<sup>th</sup> Century corn road from Hexham to Alnmouth the book describes locations that still show traces of important changes in life and work over the centuries but which are less well known than the county's popular historical landmarks. Other places, invariably in beautiful and quiet corners of Northumberland, are described under themes such as seascapes, waterfalls, places of pilgrimage, deserted villages, and stone landscapes.

Within our own area the strange landmark of the Hopper Mausoleum at Greymare Hill is described in detail, as is Thockrington on the edge of the original boundary of Hexhamshire, and Hareshaw Linn near Bellingham. They are all well worth a visit

and the book is a great encouragement to get up and out into the fresh air to see them and other infrequently visited places of interest around the county, and to form our own views of what they mean. We have come to expect Stan's books to be well illustrated and the maps and his photographs here are of the usual high standard. The book also appears at the right time of year, filled as we are with hope that under the law of averages we are due a good summer. This book will provide good company along the way.

Jim Davidson, **Northumberland's Lost Houses** (Wagtail Press, £14.99)

Local publisher Hilary Kristensen approached Jim Davidson after seeing some of his vast archive of postcards in an exhibition and the result is this fine collection of photographs of country houses in Newcastle and Northumberland. Some of the 92 properties included here were described and illustrated in Faulkner and Lowery's *Lost Houses of Newcastle and Northumberland* (1996) but this has long been out of print and hard to find. This new work contains many more besides, and many Hexham residents will be interested in the inclusion of photographs of St. Wilfrid's, site of the War Memorial Hospital, Beacon Grange and Ridlamhope. Slightly further afield lay Dilston Hall, Grey Court at Riding Mill, Prudhoe Hall Lodge, and Black Hedley – home of the Hopper family buried at the Greymare Hill mausoleum described in Stan Beckensall's new book on Northumberland (reviewed above). The indexed Gazetteer of houses is prefaced by a useful illustrated introduction, and followed by a short summary of other country houses which survived the lean post-war years long enough to find new owners and/or new purpose. Fire, decay and demolition; but also re-use and renewal.

Jennifer Norderhaug, **Sparty Lea, An Upland Leadmining Community**,  
(Wagtail Press)

The author presents this as a 'collection of information': photographs, diaries, trades account books, school logs, Church and Chapel accounts and reminiscences, gathered from the older residents of Sparty Lea in the East Allen valley in the mid 1980s. She has added transcripts of the 1851 census, a few extracts of estate rentals from the same period and a vivid contemporary description of Allenheads in 1849, before the decline in lead mining. As such it provides a snapshot of aspects of the hard life, tough winters, education, religious and social life of a hill farming and lead mining community in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In capturing and setting down this material the author has done a great service to her community for much of it might otherwise have been lost. The book makes no claim to be a traditional history

surveying what happened and why, but it does allow the reader to form a view on how much has changed in the past 50 to 100 years. It will be of direct interest to those who live in Sparty Lea, enjoy walking in its remote valley or with a family history connection to it.

**INFORMATION  
WANTED**

Veronica Dicker would like to know if anyone has any information about the houses, which were at the back of the Tavern pub near Hexham station called Hollow Meadows, where she lived in the 1950s. If you can help please contact Veronica by e-mail [v.dicker@btinternet.com](mailto:v.dicker@btinternet.com) or telephone, 01670 356595.

**Can anyone help with the date of this photograph?** Hexham trades directories



list a John Hunter, stationer, at 25 Fore Street in 1897. He was not there in the earlier directory of 1888. However, by 1902 the business was operating as Thomas William Hunter at the same address, staying there until at least 1938. Please contact Sally Funk at [slf@dccnet.com](mailto:slf@dccnet.com) if you can help

**Tim Bell** is preparing a brief history of Scotland. Part of his project is to write about Scotland as part of the British Empire during which period he considers it lost its national identity. Scotland was sometimes known as

North Britain or subsumed into some sort of Greater England. Tim grew up in Otterburn and had family there till very recently and he has always been puzzled that the pub on Market Street in Hexham should be called *Heart of England* and that Heart of all England should be the strap-line of the *Courant*. He writes that," Hexham

can make a good claim to be equidistant between both the north and south coast of the mainland, and the east and west coasts, but to give itself this soubriquet ignores the identity of Scotland. I am interested in making the claim that this is all of a piece with the assumptions of the Union and of Empire.” With this in mind, he would be interested to know if any member of the Society knows anything, which would confirm, add to, or contradict this assertion. Please contact Tim via [mail@leithwalks.co.uk](mailto:mail@leithwalks.co.uk)

## News

The Society has been granted funding by the Shaftoe Charities of Haydon Bridge to digitise the typescript of **L.C. Coombes' History of Langley Barony**. He wrote this nearly 20 years ago, and it is the product of a great deal of primary research. However, it has only been available as a single paper copy in the reference collections at Hexham and Haydon Bridge libraries. The grant means that we can convert it into editable text form as a first step to making it available to a wider audience. It is hoped that the document will be edited into a shortened format that may be available as an occasional publication in the future.

**Council For British Archaeology** The CBA works to promote the study and Safeguarding of Britain's historic environment, to provide a forum for archaeological opinion and to encourage public interest in and improve knowledge of Britain's past. CBA North is the local regional group and membership costs only £5 a year. If you would like to learn more please contact the membership secretary Tim Martin at [cbanorthmemberships@britarch.ac.uk](mailto:cbanorthmemberships@britarch.ac.uk) or CBA North, 5 Melton Drive, New Hartley, Whitley Bay NE25 0RD. There is also a website at [www.britarch.ac.uk/cbanorth](http://www.britarch.ac.uk/cbanorth)

**Stephenson 150 Festival Berwick Upon Tweed** 2009 marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Robert Stephenson. A festival is running between May and October based in Berwick, the site of the Royal Border Bridge built by Stephenson in 1850. Events include walks, exhibitions, talks and film shows. For full details contact [tk@berwick-upon-tweed.gov.uk](mailto:tk@berwick-upon-tweed.gov.uk) or telephone 01289 301760. Website at [www.berwickmuseum.org.uk/stephenson150.html](http://www.berwickmuseum.org.uk/stephenson150.html)

**HLHS Outings** You've missed the trip to the Glass Centre but there is still time to catch the bus for the evening visit to the Holy Jesus Hospital on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> June and the full day trip to Ripon on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July. Please contact Charlotte Coxon ASAP.

**Local history  
books online**

Many historical titles are being digitised and made available over the Internet. A major source of these is the website [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org). The titles listed below are those resulting from a recent search using "Hexham" as the search term. Whilst some titles are still easily available in book form, others have long disappeared, making this an invaluable resource for local historians. All titles may be viewed online as "flip books" or downloaded as PDFs or plain text.

James Dawson Burn, (1856)  
***Autobiography of a beggar boy***  
[www.archive.org/details/autobiography\\_ofb00burn](http://www.archive.org/details/autobiography_ofb00burn)

George Chatt, (1866) ***Miscellaneous Poems***  
[www.archive.org/details/miscellaneous\\_poe00chat](http://www.archive.org/details/miscellaneous_poe00chat)

James Fletcher, vicar of Hexham (c1840) ***The spirit of religious controversy***  
[www.archive.org/details/religiouscontr\\_ov00fletuft](http://www.archive.org/details/religiouscontr_ov00fletuft)

William Stanley Gibson, (1848)  
***Descriptive and historical notices of some remarkable castles, churches and antiquities...with biographical notices of eminent persons***  
[www.archive.org/details/descriptivehist\\_o00gibs](http://www.archive.org/details/descriptivehist_o00gibs)

D B Kirby, (1917) ***St Wilfrid at Hexham***  
[www.archive.org/details/saintwilfridath\\_e00kirbuoft](http://www.archive.org/details/saintwilfridath_e00kirbuoft)

George Miles, (1898) ***The bishops of Lindisfarne, Hexham, Chester-le-Street, and Durham, AD655-1020: being an introduction to the ecclesiastical history of Northumbria***  
[www.archive.org/details/bishopsoflindi\\_sf00mileiala](http://www.archive.org/details/bishopsoflindi_sf00mileiala)

Frederick C Palmer, (1912) ***Songs of the Borderland, and other verses***  
[www.archive.org/details/songsofborder\\_lan00palmiala](http://www.archive.org/details/songsofborder_lan00palmiala)

James Raine, (1838) ***Miscellanea biographica***  
[www.archive.org/details/miscellaneaabi\\_o00raingoog](http://www.archive.org/details/miscellaneaabi_o00raingoog)

Thomas Ward, (1819) ***An interesting controversy with Mr Ritschel, vicar of Hexham***

[www.archive.org/details/interestingcontr00wardiala](http://www.archive.org/details/interestingcontr00wardiala)

Arthur Biggs Wright, (1823) ***An essay towards a history of Hexham***

[www.archive.org/details/anessaytowarlsa01wriggool](http://www.archive.org/details/anessaytowarlsa01wriggool)